

History Access Reading Group

Meet with Professor ROBIN STACEY to discuss J.R.R. Tolkien

Monday, November 13th
1:30–3:30 in Smith 306

Readings:

- Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* (widely available)
- J.R.R. Tolkien, “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth, Beorhthelm’s Son” (available in History Undergraduate Advising)
- “The Battle of Maldon” (available in History Undergraduate Advising)

To the horror of many modern-day critics, J.R.R. Tolkien has several times been selected in national polls in the U.S. and Britain as "the author of the twentieth century," beating out such worthy opponents as James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway. The recent success of Peter Jackson's film version of his best-known work, *The Lord of the Rings*, has served to increase his popularity even further. Our reading for this session is Humphrey Carpenter's *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*. I have also included a short piece by Tolkien entitled “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth, Beorhthelm’s Son” together with the Anglo-Saxon heroic poem “The Battle of Maldon” for which it was intended to serve as a sequel.

Study Questions on Reverse

Please sign up for this group by visiting our website and clicking on the RSVP button
or contacting History Undergraduate Advising:

543-5691, histadv@u.washington.edu

<http://depts.washington.edu/history/studying/access/reading.html>

Study Questions

- 1) Although he is best known as an author in the fantasy genre, Tolkien was a prominent linguist and medieval literature specialist at Oxford University. How did his professional interests shape his literary works? Does his life give us any insights into the relationship between language and creativity?
- 2) Tolkien's specialty in medieval literature was the heroic literature of the ancient Germanic north, and he is often accused of "romanticizing" warfare in his works. On the other hand, Tolkien himself fought in the trenches of World War I and lost several of his closest friends to that war; several of his sons also saw action in World War II. How would you characterize his views on war and heroism based on "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth"? Based on *The Lord of the Rings* (for those of you who know this work)?
- 3) Tolkien was a devout Catholic, and yet organized religion plays no overt role in any of his best known works. Can you tell from Carpenter's account why he might have chosen to write in the way he did? For those of you who know *The Lord of the Rings*: would you characterize it as a religious work?
- 4) Tolkien was great friends with another Christian author and Oxford medievalist, C.S. Lewis. How do the circumstances of their friendship seem to have shaped the literature these two authors produced? Any ideas on why Tolkien might have hated *The Chronicles of Narnia*, one of Lewis's most well-known works?
- 5) Several people have criticized *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* for the paucity and thinness of their female characters. What do the circumstances of Tolkien's professional life at Oxford and his domestic life with Edith suggest about his attitudes towards women? Those of you who know the books mentioned above: would you agree with this criticism? Would you agree with some of Tolkien's other critics that his portrayal of subordinate "races" like orcs have potentially racist implications?